



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## TOXIC CLIMATES: EARTH, PEOPLE, MOVEMENT, MEDIA (TRANSCRIPT AND DRAMATURGY)

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🎥 <https://vimeo.com/performancephilosophy/toxic-climates>

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## Acts of citizenship



[Nørrebro Station, Copenhagen]

*The first scene is set at Nørrebro Station in Copenhagen, an urban everyday setting and a place of mobility in which diverse groups of people pass each other. In this mobile environment, the speaker addresses definitions of citizenship as more than peoples' acts but also how they are being acted upon. This in particular refers to how Nation states increasingly act upon mobile citizens, refugees and the increasing number of urban minorities being discriminated against and made invisible in urban public spaces. While this is the written discourse of the text, the posture of the speaker and her lack of acts and gestures towards the citizens passing by her point to the alienated position of the academic. As the speaker is doubled behind her and then suddenly disappears, an instant of manipulation and interference is articulated, and the scene ends with an off-screen voice, presumably the photographer or director of the film, giving the speaker instructions on to how to exit the scene. Both incidents work to further the sensation of alienation and split between words and acts.*

As noted by political theorist Engin Isin, the making of a people consists of historically invented descriptions through which people constitute themselves as acting beings. These descriptions provide the ways of acting and being in the world. They are not only descriptions in which people will act, but also how people will be acted upon. "Today, mobile peoples are a norm rather than an exception" Isin states – and perhaps always so. Taking off from this notion of the mobile peoples, we explore acts of citizenship as a plethora of practices performed beyond and across mental and geographical borders. We wish to regard human life in its own value, not as a face and identity defined by nation states, borders, institutions or disciplines.

## The triple crisis



[Sjælsmark Deportation Camp, North Zealand]

*In the second scene, we encounter the same set up with a speaker situated in front of Sjælsmark, a deportation camp for asylum seekers in north Zealand in Denmark. The observing camera is set on a distance, and the voice of the speaker is a distant murmur competing with the diegetic sounds of the wind and the birds. Despite the distance, the speaker very directly addresses toxic climates as a condition; an effect of the intersectionality of vicious feedback loops between the urbanization crisis, the climate crisis and the migration crisis. The speaker ends by asking how we encounter others who live through the crisis and how we explore with them potentials for emerging and shared sensibilities that affect our own embodied citizenships. He then turns and gazes hesitantly into the entrance of the deportation camp.*

Toxic climates are a symptom rather than a cause. A symptom that does not have a single cause. According to mobility theorist Mimi Sheller, the unbreathable atmosphere stems from the systemic and interdependent workings of three vicious feedback loops each reinforcing the other (Sheller 2018 3–9): The Climate Crisis, The Urbanization Crisis, The Migration Crisis. Together these three feedback loops create a condition of “intersectional (im)mobilities” in which the struggle over space and the right to movement becomes central to ethics and politics. Mobility justice is *the* central ethical issue. Desires for cheap and easy travel, urban transport and housing clutters our cities and poisons the air. Desire for oils and resources destroy living conditions and triggers war. The desire for continuous enjoyment of privileges for the people inhabiting urban center regions of current spatio-political hegemony stirs xenophobia and hostility when confronted with an influx of people put on the move by the degradation of livable environments and war. Toxic substances infiltrate earth, people’s movement and media. “Mobility justice is not just about transportation, but also about the micro-mobilities at the bodily scale that are inflicted by racial and classed processes,



gendered practices, and the social shaping of disabilities and sexualities. And it is about the extended urban and infrastructural spaces that shape larger macro-mobilities at a planetary scale, such as access to water and food and the circulations of energy through pipelines and cables,” as Sheller observes. But knowing the systemic workings of the triple crisis does not guide our action. How do we encounter others who live through this, through current planetary change? How do we explore with them potentials for emerging and shared sensibilities that affect our own embodied citizenships in in these toxic climates.

**It is so beautiful!**



**[Nørrebro Station, Copenhagen]**

*Back at Nørrebro station we overhear an off-screen conversation between the speaker and the director. They discuss the scenography of the site, the columns and the lively urban environment. “It is so beautiful!”, the director proclaims while directing the speaker into the position we now recognize from the first scene. The scene points to the mediated and staged aspects in both academic thinking and mediatized activism in which the aesthetic, scenic and choreographic components perform.*

## Toxic climates



[Sjælsmark Deportation Camp, North Zealand]

*Back at Sjælsmark deportation camp, we have now come closer to the speaker, who is placed in front of the fence with the sign saying "Close the gate" in Danish. He performs the text addressing intoxication and the dehumanizing forces of exclusion that is strengthened and spread by media representations. The speaker calls for a contamination of thought with action. While talking about how we could possibly contaminate media representations, the speaker is directed to walk back and forth in front of the camera. He complies, and while he walks back and forth, a similar scene from Nørrebro Station emerges, in which the female speaker is instructed to look to the side. Continuing the talk on toxic climates and the contamination of the similar toxic media representations, the male speaker continues urging listeners to contaminate thought with action; activism with thought. The statement is followed by a long pause, and the director contemplating in a calm voice: "very nice, I think it is a really strong text...I feel I want to do something now."*

Planet Earth is toxic. Its atmosphere unbreathable. Its environments intoxicated by the dehumanizing forces of xenophobia, environmental degradation and violence. As its peoples are increasingly on the move to make a worthy living, exclusion borders and conflict is a norm rather than an exception. And – as toxic substances dissipate and spreads through media and circulating representations, they cloud the sight to the human beings in front of us. In the face of the intoxicating and dehumanizing forces at play we need remedies for sobering up rather than intoxication. Remedies for living with contamination rather than altering these states. For Anna Tsing "contamination" can be a catalyst from which future world-making projects, mutual projects and new directions – may emerge" (2015: 27). But how can we think-act contamination as potential? Contaminate media representations with testimonies from people living the change? Contaminate thought with action; activism with thought.

## The capacity of a body



[Nørrebro Station, Copenhagen]

*The last scene is set at Nørrebro Station with reflections on the capacities of a body and how it relates to its surroundings and its conditioning factors. While the scene is still directed from the outside of the screen by the directing voice, it is stated that bodies are capable of differentiating themselves from its conditions and that the urban realm constantly transforms according to the expressivity of its various bodies. By this it is suggested that gestures, expressivity and the way we as bodies and citizens relate to one another might open the field of cultural. and political production and transform it from within.*

The capacity to extend, to surpass and to multiply pre-given descriptions relates to the body's capacity to affect and to be affected. Through affective relations—whether violent or joyful—the body has a capacity to transform and redirect the power imposed upon it. The body holds the capacity to change the values of a field through sensations and the powers unfolding in the field. However, from a pessimistic point of view, it can also be said to have the opposite consequences: that immanence, and the fact that we are part of the environment and culture we want to change, makes any acts of direct opposition and resistance impossible. Impossible because the body can never escape the definitions and pre-given roles of the field entirely. In relation to the field of urbanism, it is true that urban environments constantly transform according to the expressivity of its various bodies, the different bodies being immanent to the urban field. While urban bodies are capable of differentiating themselves from their conditioning factors, let's say for instance the spatial politics and planning ideals, they can never be regarded autonomous or separate, but is in a constant process of becoming that potentially holds the capacity for transformation. One might argue that change rarely happens beyond micro-perceptions and micro-realizations happening between bodies. However minor, these micro-perceptions and micro-realizations can also be seen as valuable because they operate as a starting point for relationality and affections. They are open

towards the virtual. So what I point to with this is maybe simply that there is an immanent power in suffering that can be redirected from a passive mode of affection into active affections thereby diminishing toxicity and suffering. In relation to surpassing the toxic climates of today, active affections understood as embodied and sensory expressions hold the capacity to empower the body from its passive modes of suffering into its active expressivity. Expressions and gestures that hold the capacity to transform the field from within.

## Epilogue

*Despite the fact that no direct actions take place in the last two scenes, it is suggested that the mediated and expressive gestures that in the video have been directed from the outside can potentially be redirected towards gestures changing the relations among citizens and environment in the toxic climates of today. While media representation can indeed be spread and further intoxicate our human capacity to act, they might also be directed otherwise to engage with people living the change, to situate and embody academic thought and to ethically relate to subject matters and actions outside of normative and discursive space. While aesthetics, staging and choreographic actions can serve the interests of mediated performances, they also hold the capacity for ethical relations to embodied others.*

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## Biographies

Michael Haldrup, Professor (WSR) in Visual Culture and Performance Design, Roskilde University. Numerous publications on visual methodologies, mobilities and performance among others the co-authored books *Tourism, Performance and the Everyday* (Routledge 2010) and *Performing Tourist Places* (Ashgate 2003). Recent work includes research on materiality and visual culture as well as cultural institutions and citizenship (see [www.ourmuseum.dk](http://www.ourmuseum.dk)). Visiting Scholar at *Centre for Mobilities Research*, Lancaster University, 2007. Currently working on various “speculative” approaches to performance and design including the project on *Queering Mythographies* (with D. Makisimov) consisting of performance interventions relating to the material heritage of antiquity (e. g. “Queering the Museum, Copenhagen, August 2019), speculative explorations of ‘dark ecologies’ as well as research into acts of citizenship.

Kristine Samson, PhD. Ass. Professor in Visual Culture and Performance Design, Roskilde University. Renowned urbanist and recurrent participant in the public debate on urban planning and transformation. Has written extensively on informal and tactical urbanism, spatially performed citizenship and performative urban cultures. Visiting scholar at Columbia School of Architecture and Planning 2009, and Performative Urbanism, Lab for Spatial, Social, and Scenographic Experimentation, Concordia University, Montreal, 2018. She is engaged in the cross-disciplinary research project, Affects, Interfaces, Events with a subproject on Evental Urbanism and is currently working on ecology, coexistence and ‘reparative futures’. Her curatorial work includes several performative events including Fluid Sounds for PSI – Performance Studies International, Copenhagen, 2015.

Madeleine Kate McGowan (DK / IE) Cand. IT, (ITU), BA in Visual Culture (KU) & Performance Design, RU. Lecturer, filmmaker and performance artist. Founder of Other Story (2015), a prizewinning ongoing documentary project, comprised of short films presenting personal stories in a world of monumental change. Through McGowan’s filmwork and performance work, she seeks to open encounters with the more-than-human and the complexities of the climate crisis. She is an active public speaker in several countries and her films and performance work has been widely featured across the world, such as ARoS - Aarhus Kunstmuseum (DK), Kunsthal Charlottenborg (DK), Danish House in Palestine, Nikolaj Kunsthal (DK), BFI - British Film Institute (UK), Oaxaca Filmfest (MEX), HAL Atelierhaus Leipzig (D), Souriyat Centre (Jordan), Nivaagaards Malerisamling (DK), The Royal Danish Theatre and the National Museum of Denmark.

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